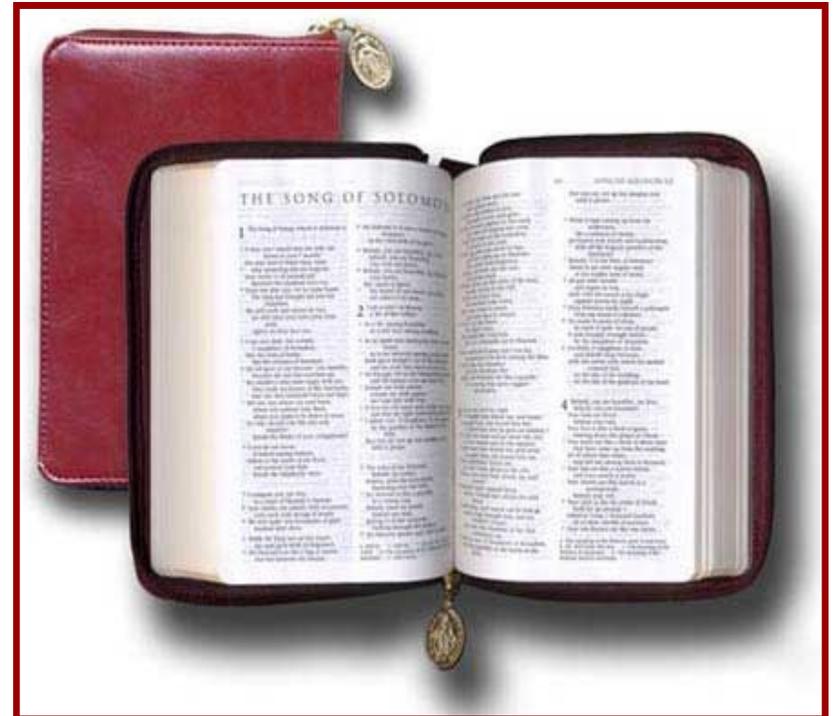




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## ***SONG OF SONGS—76***

***(SONG OF SOLOMON)***



***ON SEEKING HIM  
WITH THE WHOLE HEART***

*The Song of Songs is the story of the love between God and the soul. God is deeply in love with us, and wills our love in return. This love between the soul and God, which is the most intimate love possible, is expressed in the analogy of the bride (the Church) and the bridegroom (Jesus), where the intimacy of love is especially expressed. Commentary on the Song of Songs is presented by Saint Bernard of Clairvaux and takes the form of sermons on the meaning of the various allegories used in the psalms and are presented in the order Saint Bernard composed the commentaries. Introductory comments are made by the Early Church Fathers.*

### **On Seeking Him With the Whole Heart**

‘On my bed night after night I sought him whom my soul loves.’ The Bridegroom has not returned when the Bride calls him back with cries and prayers. Why not? He wishes to increase her desire, test her affection, and exercise her faculty of love. He is not displeased with her, he is concealing his love. But he has been sought for, and we must ask whether he may be found, for he did not come when he was called. Yet the Lord said, ‘Everyone who looks finds’; and the words used to recall him were ‘Return, my beloved, like a roe or a fawn.’ When he did not return at this call, for the reasons I have given, then she who loved him became more eager and devoted herself eagerly and entirely to seeking him. First she sought him in her bed, but she found him not at all. Then she arose and wandered through the city, going to and fro among the streets and squares, but she did not meet him or catch sight of him. She questions everyone she meets, but there is no news; nor is this search and this disappointment confined to one night or one street, for she says, ‘I sought him night after night.’ How great must be her longing and her ardor, that she does not blush to rise in the night and be seen running through the city, questioning everyone openly about her beloved, not to be deflected for any reason from her search for him, undaunted by any obstacle, undeterred by any desire for rest, or by a bride’s modesty, or by terrors of the night! Yet in all this she is still disappointed of her hope. Why? What is the reason for this long, unrelenting disappointment, which induces weariness, foments suspicion, inflames impatience, acts as a stepmother to love and a mother to despair? If he is still concealing his love, it is too painful.

10. If you have no better explanation, I suggest this as a possibility. This world has its nights - not few in number. I say the world has its nights, but it is almost all night, and always plunged in complete darkness. The faithlessness of the Jews, the ignorance of pagans, the perversity of heretics, even the shameless and degraded behavior of Catholics - these are all nights. For surely it is night when the things which belong to the Spirit of God are not perceived? There are as many nights as there are sects among heretics and schematics. In those nights you will look in vain for the sun of justice and the light of truth, that is, the Bridegroom, because light has nothing to do with darkness. ‘But,’ you say, ‘the Bride would not be so blind or so foolish as to look for light in darkness, or to search for the beloved among those who do not know him or love him.’ But she does not say that she is seeking him now night after night, and cannot find him. No, what she says is, ‘Night after night I sought him whom my soul loves.’ Her meaning is that when she was a child she understood like a child and thought like a child, looking for truth where it was not, wandering but not finding it, as it says in the psalm, ‘I have strayed like a lost sheep.’ Indeed she mentions that she was still in a little bed, being as it were tender in age and young in sensitivity.

11. If, when you read ‘In my little bed I sought him whom my soul loves,’ you understand that she was reclining, then the meaning is not ‘I sought him in my little bed,’ but ‘when I was in my little bed I sought him’; that is to say, when I was young and weak, and quite unfit to follow the Bridegroom wherever he went, to the steep and lofty heights of his glory, I encountered many who, knowing my desire, said to me, ‘Look, here is Christ; look, there he is.’ But he was not here nor was he there. Yet by encountering these men I became wiser, for the nearer I came to them and the more carefully I questioned them, the sooner I saw that the truth was not in them, and the surer I became of it. I sought him and did not find him, and I perceived that what was masquerading as day was in fact night.

12. And I said, ‘I will arise and go about the city; through the streets and squares will I seek him whom my soul loves.’ Notice now that when she says ‘I will arise’ she is lying down. Quite rightly. How could she not arise when she heard of the resurrection of her beloved? Yet, O blessed one, if you are risen with Christ, set your heart on the things which are above, not on those below; you must seek Christ above, where he sits on the right hand of the Father. But you say, ‘I will go about the city.’ For what purpose? ‘The wicked prowl on every side.’ Leave that to the Jews, of whom the prophet rightly prophesied: ‘They shall suffer hunger like dogs, and go about the city.’ And another prophet says, ‘If you enter the city, behold those who are sick with hunger,’ which would not be so if the bread of life were to be found there. He has arisen from the heart of the earth, but did not remain on earth. He has ascended to where he was before. He who came down is indeed he who has ascended, the living bread which came down from heaven, he who is the Bridegroom of the Church, Jesus Christ Our Lord, who is God above all, blessed for ever. Amen. **END OF SONG OF SONGS — 76**

8. For whom then do you keep watch, O holy women? For whom do you buy spices and prepare ointments? If you knew the greatness of this man whom you are going to anoint, how, though dead, he is free from the dead, I think you would beg instead to be anointed by him. Is it not he whom God has anointed with the oil of gladness above his fellows? How happy you will be if you can return in exultation and say, 'of his fulness we have all received.' For it was like this. The women who had gone to anoint him returned themselves anointed. How could they not, when they were anointed with the joy of the news of his fragrant resurrection? 'How beautiful are the feet of those who spread the good tidings of peace.' Sent by the angel they did the work of an evangelist, and became the apostles of the apostles, and while they hastened in the early morning to give their news of the mercy of God, they said, 'We will run in the fragrance of your perfumes.' Since that day, then, the Bridegroom has been sought in vain in a little bed, for until then the Church had known him according to the flesh, that is, according to the weakness of the flesh, but she knows it no more. True, Peter and John sought him later in the sepulcher, but they did not find him. Do you see how fitly and appropriately each of them could then say, 'In my little bed I sought him whom my soul loves; I sought him but I did not find him'? For his flesh, which was not of the Father, rid itself of every infirmity by the glory of resurrection before it went to the Father. It girded itself with strength, it put on light as a garment, that it might present itself to the Father in the splendor and beauty which was its own.

9. How beautifully then does the bride speak when she says not 'him whom I love,' but 'him whom my soul loves.' For the love by which one loves spiritually, whether its object is God, or an angel, or another soul, is truly and properly an attribute of the soul alone. Of this kind also is the love of justice, truth, goodness, wisdom, and the other virtues. But when a soul loves - or rather yearns for - anything of a material nature be it food, clothing, property, or anything else of a physical or earthly nature, that love is said to pertain to the flesh rather than to the soul. So when the Bride says that her soul loves her Bridegroom, she uses an unusual expression, but one which is none the less appropriate, for it shows that the Bridegroom is a spirit, and that he is loved with a spiritual, not a physical, love. She is right, too, when she says that she sought him night after night. For if, as Paul says, 'Those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk are drunk at night,' I think that it is not absurd to say that those who are ignorant are ignorant at night, and likewise those who seek seek at night. For who would seek what he obviously possesses? Now the day shows openly what the night concealed, so that in the daytime you may find what you sought by night. It is night, then, while the Bridegroom is being sought, for if it were day, he would be seen among us, and would not be sought at all. Enough about that subject, except that, as the Bride said, not 'by night' but 'night after night,' some questions may arise about the significance of there being more than one night.

2. Perhaps this concealment may have had some good purpose for a time, until everything was concentrated on calling him, or recalling him. But now she is seeking him and calling for him; what then can be the purpose of any further concealment? If these are incidents in a human marriage, and the love spoken of is physical love, as a superficial reading might imply, then I must leave the matter to those it concerns; but if my task is to give an answer which will satisfy, as far as I can, the minds and affections of those who seek the Lord, then I must draw from Holy Scripture - in which they trust that life to be found - something of vital spiritual importance, that the poor may eat and be satisfied and their hearts may live. And wherein is the life of their hearts but in Jesus my Lord, of whom one who lived in him said, 'When Christ our life shall appear, you also will appear with him in glory'? Let him come into our midst so that it may be truly said to us, 'One stands among you whom you do not know.'

I do not know how the Bridegroom, who is Spirit, can fail to be recognized by spiritual men, who have made sufficient progress in the spirit to say with the prophet, 'The Lord's Anointed is the spirit of life to us,' and with the Apostle, 'If we think of Christ in a worldly way, we do not know him.' Is it not he whom the Bride was seeking? Truly he is the Bridegroom, both loving and lovable. Truly, I tell you, he is the Bridegroom, and his flesh is truly food and his blood truly drink; he is wholly and truly himself, since he is none other than truth itself.

3. Why then is this Bridegroom not found when he is sought, when he is looked for so anxiously and so untiringly, now in the bed of the Bride, now in the city, or even in the streets and squares? For he himself says, 'Seek and you shall find,' and, 'He who seeks finds,' and the prophet says, 'How good you are, Lord, to the soul who seeks you,' and again, holy Isaiah says 'Seek the Lord while he may be found.' How then shall the Scriptures be fulfilled? For she who is here said to seek him is not one of those to whom he said 'You will seek me and you will not find me.'

But notice three reasons which occur to me why those who seek are disappointed: perhaps they seek at the wrong time, or in the wrong way, or in the wrong place. For if any time were the right time to seek, why does the prophet say, as I have already mentioned, 'Seek the Lord while he may be found'? There must be a time when he will not be found. Then he adds that he should be called upon while he is near, for there will be a time when he will not be near. Who will not seek him then? 'To me,' he says, 'every knee shall bow.' Yet he will not be found by the wicked; the avenging angels will restrain them and prevent them from seeing the glory of God. In vain will the foolish virgins cry, for the door is shut and he will certainly not go out to them. Let them apply to themselves the saying 'You will seek me and you will not find me.'

4. But now is the acceptable time, now is the day of salvation. It is clearly the time for seeking and for calling, for often his presence is sensed before he is called. Now hear his promise: 'Before you call me,' he says, 'I will answer. See, I am here.' The psalmist, too, plainly describes the generosity of the Bridegroom, and the urgency: 'The Lord hears the crying of the poor; his ear hears the movement of their hearts.' If God is to be sought through good works, then while we have time let us do good to all men, all the more because the Lord says clearly that the night is coming when no-one can work. Will you find any other time in ages to come to seek for God, or to do good, except that time which God has ordained, when he will remember you? Thus today is the day of salvation, because God our king before all ages has been working salvation in the midst of the earth.

5. Go then, wait in the midst of hell for the salvation which has already been worked in the midst of the earth. What use to dream of obtaining pardon among the everlasting fires, when the time for mercy has already passed? No victim will be left to atone for your sins, you will be dead in your sins. The son of God is not crucified again. He died once, he dies no more. His blood, which was poured out over the earth, does not go down to hell. All the sinners on earth will drink of it, but it is not for demons to claim for putting out their flames, nor for men who have allied themselves with demons. It was his soul, not his blood, which once descended there; and this was the portion of the spirits in prison. That was his one visit there, by which he was present in spirit, while his body hung lifeless on earth. His blood bedewed and watered the thirsty earth; his blood refreshed it; his blood brought peace to these in heaven and those on earth, but to those in hell he did not bring peace. His soul did descend there that once, as I said, and wrought redemption in part; not even at that moment would he cease his works of mercy, but beyond that he will add nothing. Now is the acceptable time, now is the right time to seek him, when he who seeks will find, if he seeks at the right time and in the right way. This is one reason which prevents the Bridegroom from being found by those who seek him, that they do not seek him at the right time. But this is not what hinders the Bride, for she calls upon him and seeks him at the right time. Nor is she lukewarm, negligent, or perfunctory in her search, but ardent and untiring, as she should be.

6. There remains the third reason which we must consider, whether she is looking in the wrong place. 'In my little bed night after night I sought him whom my soul loves.' Perhaps he should not be sought in a little bed, but in a bed, since the whole world is too narrow for him? Still, I am not displeased at the 'little bed,' for I know that Our Lord became little; 'He was born for us as a little child.' Rejoice and sing praises, O dweller in Zion, for great is the Holy One of Israel among you. That same Lord who is great in Zion is little and weak among us, and needs to lie down, and to lie in a little bed. Was his tomb not a little bed? Was the manger not a little bed? Was the Virgin's womb not a little bed? It was not a little bed but a great bed, of which the Father spoke when he said to the Son, 'Out of the womb of the morning have I begotten you.' That womb cannot be thought of as a bed at all; it is a place from which to rule rather than in which to rest. For he abides in the Father and with the Father he rules all things; our sure belief is that he does not lie down but sits at the right hand of God the Father. He himself says that the heavens are his throne, not his bed; in his own place, that is in the heavens, he does not seek comfort in weakness, but holds the emblems of power.

7. Rightly then does the Bride say, 'my little bed,' for any weakness in God is clearly not part of his nature, but of ours. It was from us that he took all those things which he took upon himself for our sake: his birth, his being nursed, his death and burial. The mortality of the new-born babe is mine, the weakness of the child is mine, the death on the cross is mine, and the sleep in the tomb is mine. All these are the former things which have passed away, and behold, all things are made new. 'In my little bed I sought him whom my soul loves.' What? Were you seeking him in your bed, when he had already returned to his own? Did you not see the Son of Man ascending where he was before? He has now changed the stable and the tomb for heaven, and are you still looking for him in your little bed? He is not here, he is risen. Why do you seek the strong in a cot, the great in a bed, the glorified in a stable? He has entered into the Lord's powers, he has clothed himself in majesty and strength; and look, he who lay under the grave-stone sits above the Cherubim. He lies down no more, he is enthroned; and are you preparing comforts for him as though he were reclining? To speak with greater accuracy, he is either enthroned as judge or stands as advocate.